



AGNIPATH SCHEME: A STEP TO MODERNISE DEFENCE FORCES IN INDIA – ISSUES AND CONCERNS

Divya V. R.

Assistant Professor, PG & Research Department of Political Science, NSS Hindu College, Changanacherry, Kottayam, Kerala

ABSTRACT

A strong defence force is an imperative one for protecting the national security of a nation. In India, the emphasis of Agnipath is on maintaining a youthful and technologically sophisticated profile of the armed services while minimising the overall burden on pensions and gratuities. The Agnipath initiative was designed to reduce the strain on the defence budget while also improving the country's preparedness in the face of rising new threats. The new system is a major shift from the former recruitment policy, which required candidates to serve at least 17 years before receiving a pension. The scheme is intended to "bring about a transformational shift towards a more tech-savvy armed force" by attracting young talent who are familiar with current technological trends and enhancing the armed services' age profile. Widespread demonstrations, acts of violence, and arson have been happening around the nation since the revelation of Agnipath. The study focuses on the analysis of the pros and cons of the Agnipath scheme introduced by the NDA government.

KEYWORDS: Agnipath; Agniveers, NDA, Defence; National Security.

INTRODUCTION

An effective military gives a nation the defence it needs to stave off invasion, thwart unjustified violence from outside sources, and handle any domestic unrest. Without a robust military, no big nation can ambitiously claim to be a world power. It serves as a defensive mechanism, reflecting the country's military might and ability to protect it against hostile countries. All major militaries across the world are undergoing reform. The number of employees is being reduced, with an emphasis on increasing capital investment in modern weaponry and equipment. From the 1980s onwards, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) underwent major demobilisation, reducing total numbers from 4.5 million to around 2 million, with a focus on modernization. The total fiscal limitation is one of the most significant difficulties confronting the Indian armed forces today.

Agnipath

The BJP-led NDA administration made groundbreaking moves to modernise the country's defence system by launching the Agnipath scheme, which intended to recruit youths into the defence forces. The government implemented an innovative recruitment strategy to make the nation's military younger, fitter, and leaner. The scheme aims to recruit non-commissioned officers into the three branches of the Indian Armed Forces. The public had no idea what the plan was until it was unveiled on 15 June 2022. When it is approved by the Indian government in June 2022, execution efforts will start in September 2022. Agnipath and Agniveer, which roughly translate to "Firepath" and "Fiery Warriors," respectively (Nanda, 2022). Long tenures, pensions, and other benefits of the prior system won't be applicable under the new system (Sharma). The Indian government revealed that the Agnipath scheme is a radical recruitment plan for the armed forces aimed at reducing wage and pension costs while also freeing up funding for critical weapon procurement. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh called it as "historic" (Pandey, 2022).

The way to view the new Agnipath scheme for recruitment into

the Armed Forces of India is to look at it as a step towards innovative human resource management as part of the overall transformation, which is underway in the national security domain of India as related to the military. That it has met with such resistance as evident in the streets may have surprised the military itself. A dispassionate analysis will explain why the youth of India is angry and how this can be cooled down. At the outset, it should be clear that we are analysing issues related not to the officer cadre of the armed forces but to the below officer cadre, which makes up a strength of almost 1.3 million (Hasnain, 2022).

The government has prioritised defence and national security modernisation to establish a combat force armed with cutting-edge technology. The scheme has been approved by the cabinet and has been dubbed a transformative reform. The Agnipath programme provided young people with a special opportunity to serve the nation by contributing to nation-building. The initiative provides an appealing financial package for Agniveers, suitable re-employment options for those returning to society, and those who could emerge as role models for the youth (Nanda, 2022).

The Indian military would supposedly be "young and fit" when the plan is executed since its average age, which is currently between 30 and 34 years, will reportedly drop by about 4-5 years. However, the plan is for four-year trainees below the level of officer. They would establish a special rank in the armed services, different from all other ranks. Agniveers will be allowed to seek permanent enlistment in the Armed Forces after serving for four years, subject to organisational requirements and policies that the Armed Forces periodically create. Up to 25% of each batch of Agniveers may be enrolled in the military's regular cadres based on their performance (Nanda, 2022). They would be required to serve for a further engagement period of 15 years. They would be governed by the existing terms and conditions of service of Junior Commissioned Officers/Other Ranks in the Indian Army and their equivalent in the Indian Navy.

and Indian Air Force, and Non-Combatants enrolled in the Indian Air Force, as amended from time to time (Nanda, 2022).

This is a major defence policy reform introduced by the government to usher in a new era in the human resource policy of the three services. Agniveers will be the name given to soldiers enlisted under the scheme. Around 45,000 people between the ages of 17.5 and 21 will be recruited into the military and will serve for four years under the new programme. A six-month training period will be included in this four-year contract. They will be paid a monthly salary of Rs 30,000-40,000 plus allowances throughout this time. They will be eligible for medical and insurance benefits as well (Pandey, 2022). According to the scheme, Agniveers will be given an attractive customized monthly package.

On completion of the engagement period of four years, Agniveers will receive a one-time 'Seva Nidhi' package, which shall comprise their contribution, including accrued interest thereon and a matching contribution from the government equal to the accumulated amount of their contribution, including interests. The 'Seva Nidhi' will be exempt from Income Tax. However, there shall be no entitlement to gratuity and pensionary benefits. (Nanda, 2022). The government says that after their stint of four years, the Agniveers will foray into civil society, where they can contribute immensely to the nation-building process. Agniveers will receive a certificate for the skills gained. Moreover, the 'Seva Nidhi' of approximately Rs 11.71 lakh would aid the Agniveer to pursue their future dreams without the financial pressure, which is normally the case for young people from the financially deprived strata of society", according to the announced scheme. (Nanda, 2022).

The new scheme will reduce the Indian armed forces' average age to 26 years from 32 years. It will also reduce the expenses earlier made for pensions. Therefore, on the one hand, the scheme brings modernisation, and on the other, it reduces the expense. The government's new scheme can be understood in three points

- 1) The scheme will be implemented in all three forces - Army, Navy and Air Force. The recruitment will only be done on the positions below the officer ranks, i.e. on Non-Commissioned Ranks.
- 2) Personnel between the ages of 17-21 will be eligible for these roles. They will only work with the force for four years. The personnel will get training for the initial 6 months and later they will be sent to work on different roles. They will retire on completion of their tenure of 4 years.
- 3) The government will provide a beefy package to these agniveers on their retirement (Chaudhary, 2022).

The supporters of the scheme argued that under the scheme 45,000 people between the age of 17-21 years are to be inducted into the services for a four-year tenure—they say, is an essential reform to modernise the military. Not only would it create a tech-savvy force—future-ready men and women with the training and capability to lead troops in a high-tech battle environment, but it would also reduce the age profile of the army. The intent, they aver, is to create a skilled, disciplined, and motivated force that will propel the nation onto a growth trajectory (Singh, 2022).

Agniveers will also be given preference in recruitment for the Central Armed Police Forces and State Police. As a result, even if the contract expires after four years in the armed forces, these

Agniveers will have plenty of opportunities. Furthermore, as a result of these developments, the younger generation will have more opportunities to work with the Indian armed forces (Kumar, 2022).

Criticisms of the Agnipath Scheme

The military profession is regarded as one of the most appealing in India, and the armed forces command enormous affection, adulation, and adoration from the general population. A career in the military forces is a dream for the hardy, youthful rural stock and those from the smaller metropolitan hubs around the country. Much time, effort, and even money is expended in seeking to gain admission through a demanding recruitment system. These men, and increasingly women, dedicate themselves to the nation and are willing to risk their lives in the line of duty. The country has also not been late in fulfilling its end of the bargain, providing a career opportunity that could require many of these young people to serve for up to 30 years.

Most crucially, it promises and delivers a lifetime pension to them, as well as a family pension to their spouses in the case of their death; such social security is unthinkable in many sophisticated countries. Without expounding on these traits, a last and most important point is that at least 65,000 of these men leave the military forces each year as disciplined and contented members of society; a kind of comfort zone for the country. When the government amended pension laws for other services by putting them under the scope of the National Pension System (notified 1 January 2004), the armed forces were exempted and their benefits continued as before, owing to the respect they are held with (Hasnain, 2022).

Widespread demonstrations, acts of violence, and arson have been happening around the nation since the revelation of Agnipath. Firstly, Agnipath's merits and demerits continue to figure prominently in newspapers and on social and electronic media, as youths across several states riot against it, burning and disrupting trains, buses and police vehicles. But the irrevocable upshot is that, despite such pervasive unrest and criticism of the scheme by both serving and veteran officers, the government is neither going to revoke or majorly alter the scheme, or even admits any fallibility in its conception. It aims to kick off the Agniveer recruitment drive later this week (Bedi, 2022).

The main cause appears to be a perceived loss of the safety and stability that a permanent government post with an appealing life-long pension gave under the former recruitment programme, despite its bad impact on the country's defensive capability. To assuage worries, the Central Government and various state governments have proposed several incentives, including a two-year age relaxation and employment reservations for demobilised Agniveers. At first glance, it appears that the job reservations announced thus far are sufficient to absorb the Agniveers departing after four-year tenure. With the advantage of hindsight, one could argue that these incentives were beneficial (Behera, L. K. 2022, June 22).

Many veterans such as Lt. Generals KJ Singh and Jaishankar Menon and Major Generals like V K Madhok and Raj Mehta have argued against Agniveers. They are concerned that a combat soldier cannot be trained in four years, and the scheme thus compromises national security. As Colonel Rathore agrees with these veterans, "the idea of shortened training spell indirectly trivializes the skill-sets for which the armed forces train their cadres so diligently. For instance, the Army alone has over 150 trades, which is peculiar.

The tenure of a soldier sailor or airman under the Agnipath scheme would be chock-a-block with activities. In his four-year tenure, the recruitment training, authorized leaves, and temporary duties would eat up to 90 weeks. Is it possible to groom a green soldier as a missile pilot, a tank and artillery gunner, a machine gunner, a vehicle driver, or even a scout who moves ahead of an infantry section in the remaining period and then loses him?" (Nanda, 2022).

Thirdly, they argue that retrenching youth from the armed forces after four years will create security problems. Given the experience of retired soldiers at the age of 38, it is complicated to get absorbed into the paramilitary forces. In other civilian sectors, mostly retired armed forces personnel get jobs as guards in private security agencies. Mostly, they cannot find respectable employment and are dependent on their pensions and other post-retirement benefits. (Nanda, 2022).

However, in the case of Agneevaeers, so run the arguments, as they will be leaving the armed forces at a tender age of 21 to 25, they can, if unemployed, fall prey to the lure of crime syndicates, radical political outfits, and worse the foreign intelligence agencies. Trained in handling weapons and explosives and having the basic knowledge of military establishments functioning, such a person can be a real security threat. Some of the more enterprising ones could join the overseas mercenary groups and private military contractors (PMCs). After all, in Ukraine today, many PMCs are fighting for that country. (Nanda, 2022).

A significant concern of the government has always been that "manpower costs are also eating into the capital allocation of the armed forces to cover revenue demand." budgetary constraints happen to be a significant factor in this decision. For instance, India's defence budget for 2022-23 is Rs 5.25 lakh crore, of which Rs 1.2 lakh crore is for the pension component, let alone the salaries. (Nanda, 2022).

As Amit Cowshish, a retired senior defence ministry official, says, of the total defence budget this year, 44.37% is earmarked for the services' revenue expenditure, 29.01% for meeting their capital requirement, and 22.79% for defence pensions. And salaries plus pensions account for 55.3% of the services' total revenue budget. (Nanda, 2022). In the Indian Army, the largest of the three services, salaries account for an even higher share of the revenue budget. From 69.16% in the current fiscal, this goes up to 70.78% in the FY23. To put it in perspective, it was 60.92% in 2010-11. (Nanda, 2022).

No major country can afford to have adverse capital-to-revenue expenditure and pension bill ratios. The modernization of the forces is essential and one of the best ways to achieve the above is to reduce the workforce. In fact, in the last 25 years, all major armed forces have cut the workforce. Only 25% of these troops will be retained after four years, and they will enter the regular cadre, where they will serve for a total of 15 years in non-officer positions. The remaining employees will receive a package of between Rs 1.1 million and Rs 1.2 million when they leave the service, but they will not be eligible for pension benefits (Pandey, 2022). A skill-set certificate at the end of their engagement period is likely to bolster their prospects in the job market (Singh, 2022). Agneevaeers will be inducted, trained, and then discharged in a short period of four years. Several people raised the question that with little specialisation, how will Agneevaeers be deployed on the frontlines of a warzone? Considering the short duration of their employment, how will their performance be evaluated? Will demobilised Agneevaeers be

accommodated in other government jobs? Many raise doubts about the scheme's viability and sustainability over the long run (Singh, 2022).

Many people are concerned that the 'Agnipath' plan would potentially militarise society. With their dreams of serving in the military for a full 15 years dashed, the demobilised Agneevaeers may succumb to the allure of crime syndicates and extremist political organisations. Some might join overseas mercenary groups or private militias. Such concerns may look extreme, yet they are not entirely unwarranted (Singh, 2022). The initiative is a cost-cutting measure designed to decrease the government's wage and pension expenses while also freeing up funds for military modernization.

There are also concerns about the military's ability to conduct Agneevaeer recruitment. The Army's recruitment staff will need to be enlarged many times over, putting the force's current capabilities under strain. It would also imply raising the tail-to-teeth ratio, with more battle-hardened men training fresh recruits and contract troops improving in strength year after year. The most pressing issue is the retention of Agneevaeers in service. The proposed basic military training schedule of 26 weeks is unlikely to provide recruits with adequate knowledge and exposure to significantly contribute to their units (Singh, 2022).

Many democracies the world over impart military training to their entire youth. It is a wise step to discipline impressionable minds and motivate them to be patriotic and humane. An appropriate quote for the old mindset is, It is easier to get a new idea in, but the only thing harder than getting a new idea into the human mind is getting the old one out (Sehgal, 2022). Hence, the recent palliatives of 10% job reservations in the Central Para Military Forces (CAPF), Assam Rifles and 16 defence public sector units were announced for demobilised Agneevaeers only after the protests erupted. Alongside, several BJP-ruled states and other public sector corporations also competed with one another in offering future employment to large numbers of Agneevaeers, discharged after a four-year tour of military duty. Nonetheless, some media reports citing official data expressed severe scepticism on this count (Bedi, 2022).

CONCLUSION

The Agnipath project is a result of compulsions brought on by serious strategic and financial inadequacies, not by a vision for the reform of the armed forces. The military's ethos, battle readiness, and leadership's capacity to support its troops might all be negatively impacted. The central government's Agnipath project is undeniably a game-changing initiative. The Agnipath scheme heralds a new era of bold reforms to strengthen India. The administration should be commended for pursuing such extreme reform, especially given the emotional nature of the transformation. The reform was long overdue and is beneficial to the country's defence readiness. The Agnipath scheme is a transformative one. It will result in the development of a tech-savvy, young workforce, as well as basic military ideals such as nation-first, which are critical for India's continuous growth and success. The Agneevaeers will be useful in both defending our borders and moving India closer to being a modern, technology-driven, young global superpower.

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